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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of what role accrediting agencies should play in supporting the arts and sciences in higher education. It is argued that there is no current alternative for supporting the arts and sciences other than the historical one that already exists with the accrediting agencies. Also noted is that the arts and sciences are currently transforming their boundaries, and that they are fundamental to the undergraduate curriculum. Further explored is the basic premise that the arts and sciences are the bedrock of undergraduate education for both epistemological and empirical reasons. It is proposed that accrediting agencies need to look at the institutional expression of mission; the role assigned to the arts and sciences; and at the congruence of mission, programs, and resources. The paper concludes with the observation that supporting the arts and sciences has been the historical role of the regional accrediting bodies, and this should continue with a new expanded role designed to embrace the special status of the arts and sciences in the full range of undergraduate education. (GLR)

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AN APOLOGIA FOR THE ARTS AND SCIENCES[1]

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The Question:

As part of the North Central Association's concern for values, the question which has been posed for our consideration today is the following: What role should accrediting agencies play in supporting the arts and sciences? The question as posed implies that there has been a positive answer to the prior question -- a question which needs to be made explicit. The prior question is not what role the agencies should play, but should they even play a role. My answer to this prior question is a strong affirmative -- yes, they should play a role. Thus, the focus of this discussion is on the kind of role that I believe the agencies should play and why.

Let me begin by outlining my position. The first point is that the regional accrediting agencies should play a role in supporting the arts and sciences. The second point is that the role played should go beyond a general education requirement. And the third point, which serves as the basic premise of my argument, is that the arts and sciences are the bedrock of undergraduate education.

An Answer:

Since the third point is the linchpin of my argument, I'll begin with the case for making such an assertion. There are two sets of reasons for contending that the arts and sciences are the bedrock of undergraduate education -- epistemological reasons and empirical reasons. From an epistemological point of view, and considering the arts and sciences as disciplines in their own right, the case can easily be made that they infuse the overwhelming majority of undergraduate curricula. Students study them directly, students draw on them for their general education, and students are exposed to their methods and content in almost every undergraduate course which they take. Faculty, in turn, draw on them for the design of the major, minor, general and elective elements of the undergraduate curriculum, even as they may be involved in transforming the boundaries of these disciplines.

Looked at epistemologically, the arts and sciences are the bedrock of undergraduate education in a second way; they undergird the specialized or professional areas of study at the undergraduate level. What would a program in business be, for example, without mathematics, economics, psychology and sociology? And the same question can be asked of nursing programs, education programs, engineering programs, music programs and so on -- what would they be at the undergraduate level without the undergirding of the arts and sciences disciplines?

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But beyond these epistemological reasons, there are empirical reasons for contending that the arts and sciences are the bedrock of undergraduate education. In their compendium of research results called *How Colleges Affect Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) review data gathered over the past 25 years on the affects that collegiate experiences have on students. Despite some qualifiers which recognize affects by type of college and gender differences, the bottom line conclusion is that students change on a broad front in an integrated way, especially from the beginning to the end of their collegiate careers. There are changes in the factual knowledge which they possess, changes in their general cognitive and intellectual skills, as well as a wide-ranging array of other acquisitions. But the telling point is that included, and even primary in these acquisitions, are those attributed to general education and exposure to the arts and sciences.

Before defending the remainder of my position, I want to share both some personal and some historical perspectives on the issue at hand. The experiences which brought me to the conclusions expressed in my first and second points derive from the many years that I served as an academic administrator in comprehensive institutions where my task was to bring the values of a liberal arts and sciences education and professional education together into an integrated whole.

Comprehensive institutions, as you know, are comprised of a college of arts and sciences and several professional schools and colleges within the same entity. I became keenly and directly aware of the tug that exists between professional and liberal arts programs, not only for the hearts and minds of students in terms of allegiance to a major, but also and especially for institutional resources. In such a setting, it does not take long to discover that the match is an uneven one due to the fact that professional programs have strong internal voices which are much abetted from the outside by the specialized accrediting groups. Whether the group represents business or education or engineering or music or technology or the arts, there is one statement in common which appears in virtually every specialized accrediting group's report to the institution -- there is need to allocate more resources to the programs in question. Thus, the academic administrator within the comprehensive institution who is also responsible for the role of the arts and sciences, strives against formidable odds, and virtually alone, to ensure a balance in the allocation of resources among the professional programs and the arts and sciences. The experience of dealing with these competing pressures brought to bear within an institution's program structure very much influence the stand that I take today.

The answer to the question posed concerning the role accrediting agencies should play in supporting the arts and sciences, is further informed by gaining some historical perspective on the issue. Regional accrediting agencies usually address the issue of the arts and sciences through a general education standard and requirement. This is no accident. The general education movement and the accrediting agencies began about the same time, in the early 20th century, and for some of the same reasons. As Rudolph (1977) explains in his informative history of the *Curriculum*, the agencies arose because philanthropic foundations which were seeking to support colleges in their development were hard put to know what a college legitimately was. At that time, colleges were perceived to be in disarray because of the rise in elective courses of study and the move away from a classical curriculum. The agencies were thus given the task of defining a college and its appropriate curriculum. Almost simultaneously, the general education movement began. It set about to define and enforce a common curriculum as an antidote to what was perceived as student bewilderment in

the face of the freedom afforded by an elective course of study. And thus a natural alliance emerged between the goals of accrediting agencies and those working on behalf of general education.

The General Education Requirement:

Skipping over several decades to the present, the current situation for accrediting agencies is that they still use a general education standard as a requisite in their institutional review process. The North Central Association, for instance, in its second institutional requirement for accreditation states: *General education at the postsecondary level is an essential element of undergraduate degree programs . . .* (1992, p.13) The Association goes on to explain what its understanding of general education is. First, it provides a negative definition whereby "general" means not related to technical or vocational or professional preparation (which leaves, of course, a large arena). "General" education is also understood to be the common curriculum or that which is part of every student's course of study. And thirdly, general education is intended to impart common knowledge, intellectual concepts, and the *attitudes that every educated person should possess*. But who among us can identify with certainty what the "attitudes" of the educated person are.

It is also instructive to note that the New England Association (1992) has recently revised and strengthened its standards regarding general education. It states in its materials that: *The general education requirement is coherent and substantive, and it embodies the institution's definition of an educated person* (underscoring mine). This Association, however, gives more specificity to its explanation of general education and states that it must ensure adequate breadth of study and show a balanced regard for what are traditionally referred to as the arts and sciences. Particular competencies are even spelled out -- written and oral communication in English, ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and logical thinking, and capability for continuing learning. Not unlike, we should note, those competencies found by Pascarella and Terenzini, especially in graduates from liberal arts colleges.

The New England Association also requires that one-third of the undergraduate program be dedicated to general education. This is reminiscent of the Carnegie Foundation Study of 1977. You may recall that this study found that students tended to divide their curricula into thirds -- one third for general education, one third for their major, and one third for electives. It is also important to remember that, at the same time, the Carnegie study drew a conclusion which is probably the most oft-quoted comment about general education. The conclusion: *General education is now a disaster area.* (1977, p.11) Although I disagree that general education is properly characterized in 1992 as a disaster area, I do think that another Carnegie observation remains persuasive, namely that: *No curricular concept is as central to the endeavors of the American college as general education and none is so exasperatingly beyond the reach of general consensus and understanding* (p.164).

If then regional accrediting agencies rely on their general education standards or requirements as their means of supporting the arts and sciences, we are destined to encounter and reencounter all of the problems attendant to the area, most of which remain unresolved. Witness, for example, the Association of American Colleges' 1985 report, *Integrity in the College Curriculum.* It again drew attention to the deficiencies of general education and outlined eight components which the framers of the report contended should be part of a "minimum required curriculum." The eight elements are

much like the specifics laid out by the New England Association with the addition of components dealing with values, the arts, and international/multicultural experiences.

Now in 1992, AAC is launching still another project on general education. And the search goes on, and in my opinion, should go on. General education should, almost must, remain unresolved because it is a vital and dynamic part of the curriculum as it seeks to respond and adapt to the changing notion of the educated person and the changing context for the functioning of the educated person. In addition, I would note that the general education curriculum, alone as the purveyor of the educational values of the arts and sciences, is getting overburdened. It must not only adjust to the transformation of the boundaries of the arts and sciences, but it is also now being asked to address global issues, gender issues, and the issues of multiculturalism.

Given all of the above concerning the state of general education, we are confronted with a fundamental question -- is requiring a general education component in the undergraduate curriculum sufficient to define the role regional accrediting agencies should play vis-a-vis the arts and sciences? My answer is no. The general education requirement is necessary, but not sufficient to ensure the adequacy and rightful place of the arts and sciences in the undergraduate experience of students.

Beyond General Education to Institutional Mission:

If general education is not an adequate indicator, then what can accreditors do? No wheel need be reinvented. They can begin where they have historically begun -- with the institutional mission, and in particular, with the place of the arts and sciences within that mission. They can ask whether, in terms of the statement of institutional mission and educational objectives, the arts and sciences are at the core or integral to the institution, complementary to other program areas, or secondary, or even less than secondary, in the institution's educational scheme. It is appropriate for accreditors to ask what objectives are sought, and to be alert to possible contradictions among the mission, educational objectives, and the allocation of institutional resources. This means going well beyond an examination of the general education curriculum and into the perfectly justifiable tracking of the allocation of resources in accord with the role that the institution assigns to the arts and sciences -- in their own right, and in their epistemological role of undergirding both the general education curriculum and professional programs.

Let us now look more closely at the issue and role of institutional mission. If the institutional mission is to be a liberal arts and sciences college, then the answer should be obvious. There should be a congruence of mission, objectives and resources, i.e., the arts and sciences should be coextensive in programs and resources with the mission. In these cases, the accrediting agency's role is comparatively easy and unambiguous.

If the mission of the institution is to be a liberal arts and sciences college, but it is really functioning as a mini-comprehensive, then the role of the accreditors is problematic. I use the word "mini-comprehensive" to refer to those colleges which at one time functioned as liberal arts colleges but over the past 15 to 20 years have transformed their mission by adding a variety of professional programs in order to respond to the needs of their constituencies. This change to a more comprehensive type institution has often taken place at the expense of resources formerly directed toward the arts and sciences, but the demands on the arts and sciences in terms of their educational

role in the institution, in their own right, and as the underpinning of general education, have not diminished. A lack of balance in the distribution of resources (whether we speak of faculty, financial or facility resources) may be detected by accreditors and should be addressed. In addition, these institutions should be asked to rethink and restate their mission since the rhetoric of the liberal arts no longer captures their true essence as an institution of higher learning.

If the mission of the institution is that of a full-fledged comprehensive university where the arts and sciences and professional education coexist, then several pertinent questions arise regarding the balance of resources and curriculum. The relationship between the two forms of education becomes critical, and the extent to which the institution assigns educational roles to the arts and sciences is key. Accrediting agencies are right to call the institution to account if there is imbalance according to the institution's own statement of mission and educational objectives for its students. Since instances of true integration of professional and liberal education are indeed rare, there is a fertile field of examination open here.

Regarding other types of institutions, accrediting agencies would address the role of the arts and sciences to the extent that the institution rests its mission, programs, curricula and educational objectives on them. To the extent that an institution incorporates the arts and sciences into its mission, promotes them in their own right, uses them to undergird their general education programs and their undergraduate curricula in the professional programs, then it is within the purview of accreditors to support the allocation of appropriate resources to the arts and sciences and to ask the same penetrating questions that specialized accreditors do for professional programs. In simple terms, if the arts and sciences are not strong, then general education cannot be strong and neither can any other programs which are dependent upon them.

Alternatives to Regional Accreditation:

But before we content ourselves in thinking our case has been made, let us ask about alternative approaches. If the responsibility for the arts and sciences does not rest with the regional accrediting groups, where does it rest? As one who has dealt with a long list of accrediting groups, the temptation might be to say no where, or to suggest that it rests with the institution alone, or more cynically with those poor struggling administrators juggling the allocation of resources within an institution. One might even entertain the idea that the responsibility should rest with a separate accrediting body in order to counter the influence and power of the specialized groups. This is not a new idea; it has emerged periodically and we have a current example before us. The National Association of Scholars has recently received funding to undertake an initiative to form a group tentatively called the National Academy for the Advancement of Liberal Education. This group proposes to develop standards, processes and procedures by which institutions may be accredited in terms of their liberal arts and sciences curriculum. Until that group gets underway, the jury must be out as to whether such a development will be a boon or detriment to the cause of the arts and sciences.

So we turn back to the regional accrediting groups. Since these agencies are voluntary bodies, if the members of the association agree to a statement of the value of the arts and sciences, beyond but including their role in general education, and regardless of student major or future professional career, then the usual accrediting process and review can proceed as described above. What role

do the arts and sciences have in the mission of the institution and its achievement of its educational goals? And to what extent are resources allocated in line with this role? One possible practical approach which might be tried, if these principles are put in place, would be to invite some institutions to make the arts and sciences the centerpiece of a focused visit, to have them volunteer to feature the arts and sciences and their role in the institution in a focused review. I believe that we would learn much from this approach which would help in shaping guidelines and standards for all institutions. But, in all this, we must recognize that just as it is not possible to define general education outside of its institutional context, the same is true for the arts and sciences which derive their educational meaning and role from their institutional context. Accreditors, however, can enforce the definition and role of the arts and sciences put forth by the institution through attention to the resources for and place of the arts and sciences in the total curriculum.

Summary Conclusion:

In the last analysis, my points are few: that accrediting agencies should play a role in supporting the arts and sciences. For this, I see no current alternative and it is consistent with their historical role. Even though the arts and sciences are currently transforming their boundaries, they are still fundamental to our undergraduate curricula. Secondly, the role played by the accrediting agencies should go beyond a general education requirement for all the reasons noted previously. But most importantly, my basic premise is that the arts and sciences are the bedrock of undergraduate education for both epistemological and empirical reasons. In light of this, accrediting agencies need to look at the institutional expression of mission, the role assigned to the arts and sciences, and at the congruence of mission, programs and resources. Such has been the historical role of the regional accrediting bodies, and such should be their new expanded role designed to embrace the special role of the arts and sciences in the full range of undergraduate education.

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